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ABSTRACT

To ascertain what type of environment exists in elementary classrooms in the United States to stimulate oral language, questionnaires were mailed to 500 classroom teachers. Data from the 412 respondents indicated that 83% believed their college courses in language arts had not prepared them to encourage the development of children's language, and 25% believed that reading to children was good because it increased vocabulary. In addition, the results showed that teachers were not clear on the purpose of oral language, that they did not understand the relationship between oral and written language, that 75% of the schools surveyed did not have an oral language curriculum, and that generally little attention was paid to the oral language of children as long as they could answer the teacher's questions. Teachers could improve instruction in oral language by creating an environment in which children are encouraged to develop oral language, combining Michael Halliday's theory that language use and purpose are the heart of language learning with Walter Loban's concept of growth stages in syntactic complexity, and by teaching children to use the oral language process of talking to others or to themselves as one step in the reading process. (TJ)

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ORAL LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION IN THE UNITED STATES

The State of the Arts

There exists in the United States today a syllogism:

money=education

education=reading

reading=money (4)

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The pragmatism and pervasive materialism of American society are affecting education: the prime concerns of the public have become reading and writing, but this concern is not shared by the children. I am gravely concerned. We seem to be skilling our children and we are killing their interest in reading. Teachers in the United States are being forced into highly detailed programs of skill geared to develop skill competencies.

Unfortunately, the sum of the parts (skills) do not necessarily equal the whole (reading). Traditionally, language arts education has been concerned with two of the three "R's," reading and writing. There was some concern for a while for speaking and listening, especially in the forties when we actually had elocution lessons or diction lessons in United States schools. This, however, is unheard of and completely disregarded today. The basic skills of speaking and listening are assumed by educators and this assumption leads to neglect. Few teachers recognize the importance of continuous growth in the use of oral language. Students' acquisition of reading and writing skills preoccupy teachers, dominate curriculum, motivate research and, in fact, are the principal reason parents enroll their children in the schools.

Studies in linguistics and psycholinguistics, especially in the late sixties, influenced teachers to examine the role of oral language in learning, and research demonstrated the positive correlations between oral language and reading. For the research we presume that oral language development in children has an effect on their language and

vocabulary development and that eventually it will improve their reading and writing ability. We cannot say how a child learns language. We do have a fairly substantial notion what the child must learn. Piaget tells us that language develops and unfolds very naturally and regularly given the proper environment (11). The development process of language is not a rigid timetable. My research was undertaken to determine what type of environment exist in classrooms in the U.S. to stimulate oral language.

In my study I have tried to determine the following: 1) the attitude of teachers toward oral language in the classroom; 2) the priorities raised by teachers as they deal with children's problems in oral language; 3) the social background of the teachers and children; 4) the impact of teacher education on teachers' emphasis on oral language instruction; and 5) recommendations by teachers for improving the profession. In analyzing this information I hope to not only determine the current situation, but also to make recommendations for improving instruction in oral language.

The data was gathered through a questionnaire mailed in January, 1977 to classroom teachers selected from the National Council of Teachers of English membership files. The computer was programmed to randomly select 500 persons who had identified themselves as classroom teachers in grades one to six. Between 55 to 60 percent of the 412 respondents were teachers at the primary level. Eighty-three percent of the teachers indicated that they had not received any instruction

at the college level on the importance of oral language in the classroom. They indicated that their college courses in language arts methodology did not prepare them to encourage the development of children's language. Twenty-five percent indicated that reading to the children was good, primarily because they felt it helped to teach vocabulary. A few mentioned that fostering good listening habits was their goal in reading children's literature to children. Teachers were asked to indicate the frequency of oral language improvement activities at all grade levels. A majority of the teachers indicated that they paid very little attention to the oral language of the children as long as they could answer the teacher's questions. At the first grade level the majority of teachers were interested in developing the children's oral language but this concern faded in the upper grades.

Vygotsky (1962) explored why children are so slow in learning the written form of language. He found that children have "little motivation for it and only a vague idea of its usefulness." Vygotsky's analysis is crucial. He is telling us that the basic reason children are slow in learning to write is their lack of understanding of the functions of written language. (16) They don't see a need for writing. This concept of usefulness can also be applied in considering oral language. There is motivation on the part of the child to learn to speak but the child he has only vague ideas of its usefulness and varied applications. As Piaget says children's experiences of communication with peers is so limited that they are not "aware of the appalling density of the human mind." (9)

Teachers often assume that certain concepts of language are self-evident and therefore believe that it is not necessary to help children understand the reasons for learning. The purposes of language development are often clear to teachers but not to their students. My survey demonstrated that teachers were not clear on the purpose of oral language. The responses I received indicated that the teachers thought it, meaning oral development, was good but did not know why. Even from the middle grades, students and teachers often do not have a clear notion of the purpose of reading and writing. When most of the children's days are occupied with worksheets the purpose is none other than finishing the worksheets. They drill, practice saying words, and match symbols with words.

We, as teachers, must create an environment in which children are encouraged to develop oral language and where <u>they</u> see the connection of dialogue with parents, with members of their peer group, and with teachers and other students the true function of oral language will be stimulated. The Bullock Report (Department of Education and Science, 1975) suggests an approach to this task: "Language development . . . involves creating situations in which, to satisfy his or her own purposes, a child encounters the need to use more elaborate forms and is self-motivated to expand the complexities of language available to him." (12) This is why the Bullock Commission advocated the use of a language-experience approach at all stages of reading education. In the Soviet Union a study by Elkonin (4) encouraged children to have fun with language. His research has shown that children instinctively

know the linguistic concepts related to spoken language which are necessary in learning to read and write. For example, making up or creating a word to see if others will understand you. Similar studies with English-speaking children have been conducted by Downing in Canada, who involved children in creating their own system of symbols for linguistic concepts. He has found that the children do understand how language operates. Vygotsky notes that direct teaching of concepts is impossible, fruitless, and unnecessary. "A teacher who tries to do this usually accomplishes nothing but empty verbalisms, a parrot-like repetition of words by the child simulating a knowledge of the corresponding concepts but actually covering up a vacuum." Yet I found that most teachers felt the only way they were helping children develop oral language was by teaching vocabulary.

Loban (8) has made a great contribution to the field in his study revealing that children's language develops in stages. Carol Chomsky (3) has done research in children's acquisition of syntax from age five to ten. Her work further develops the concept in the Loban study. On the other side, Michael Halliday (6) is not concerned with syntax and syntactical development, but rather he looks at language by considering its functions within the social context. Halliday has developed a comprehensive theory of how children learn the function of language. I believe a combination of the Loban and Halliday studies would provide a more complete understanding of how children use language. If we combine the concepts of Halliday (telling us that language use and purpose is the heart of language learning) with Loban's concept of

syntax (telling of the stages of growth in syntax complexity) it makes for exciting understanding of children's language development. We need to investigate the dimensions of how we set purpose in education: how is a child stimulated to orally communicate in the home, how can teachers and parents make language meaningful to the child?

Halliday tells us that although infants do not speak they can express meaning for their own purpose using sounds. They soon learn to use language to control other's behavior. Children master a certain number of elementary language functions and a range of expressions rapidly expands within each function. Children's use of language for different and increasingly varying functions is reinforced by Halliday. Children learn language for their own purpose and achieve success in making their meaning clear to others. They are acquiring a "moving potential" which can be used for their own purpose.

The concept of language functions in the developmental stages becomes vital when we think about the importance of reading and writing. Until the time children enter school, they have used language only for their own purpose. In school educators are encouraging use of language for an entirely different function which might not be meaningful to the children. They need to be motivated to learn and expand language skills because they need to communicate with other people. The educational program in the United States today basically aims at amassing information.

My survey indicated that teachers do not have an understanding of the relationship between oral language and written language. 75% of the schools surveyed do not have an oral language curriculum. My prediction is the frustration with the literacy in the U.S. will only go away when and if we plan curriculum which includes four basic parts: content, components, context and control. Oral language curriculum will challenge the child to develop logical thinking or sequence, the base of every reading comprehension skill. The child will be encouraged to logical talk: following direction and giving directions, determining cause-effect relationship, cause-effect, time-space relationship. Storytelling provides experience in sequence with all the subdivision just listed.

It is now quite clear that some authorities such as Frank Smith, Kenneth Goodman, et al, are defining reading comprehension as a hypothesizing operation in which we are constantly anticipating (10). This same logical process is going on while a person is telling some narrative. Oral conversing, interviewing and dramatizing are all involved in storytelling.

To be a successful reader another process so basic is the ability to classify. This is my term for semantic and semantical variation. I'm sure many teachers would refer to this same term: classification, by a more familiar term: vocabulary development. A teacher creating an

environment gives children opportunity to lose the hesitancy to talk. Fluency will aid the quality of speech and the ability to use words in various usage. This usage is very important to reading. Each time a child hears a new word the child attaches that word to a"schema" or association. This word, because of the many associations, is used in various ways as a child needs it as the story is told. The words need to be a part of the stock-pile of concepts in the child's mind. A child will never comphrehend written language if the language is not a part of oral language. As adults this is reversed but for the young child the reading ability is dependent on the understanding of language.

A child can bring to written language the ability to perceive, classify and mentally act upon the stimulii with logical operations. This process can be referred to as: interconnect. This could well be the most important capacity to be brought to bear in the comprehension of language in any mode. The child must be able to operate first in the oral mode before the child can do it in a double symbol form (reading).

Finally to ensure comprehension of written language there needs to be a production. We might call it assimulation or paraphrasing. Persons need to talk to themselves or to another. When this happens the concept comes together to form another concept. This new concept is a slight change from both of the previous concepts. This oral language of talking to oneself or telling another is quite often a step in the reading process. This is not always done hence we miss the final and vital step in the reading process.

Based on the few ideas of logical reasoning and reading presented here: determining valid conclusions, dealing with causality, we see that reasoning skills are necessary for comprehension. The teachers need to create that environment so the child will want to talk (6). This reasoning ability is developed through talking, through children telling stories.

Summary

We have seen through a survey research gathered information that leads us to think that oral language in schools in the U.S. is generally non-existing. There is no oral language curriculum, nor do the teachers seem to have an understanding of the role oral language has in relationship to reading. We have proposed a base for oral language curriculum based on Loban, Halliday and Piaget's theories. Helping children by creating an environment which stimulate children to want to discuss, to dramatize their stories gives children the perfect base for reading.

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